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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PINR](#) [SO](#)

SUBJECT: SOMALIA - SENATOR FEINGOLD'S MEETINGS ON SOMALIA

REF: 08 Nairobi 2781

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. From December 19-21 Senator Feingold met in Djibouti with Somalia and Somaliland politicians, the UN Secretary General's Special Representative as well as NGO and private sector representatives. The meetings occurred at a critical juncture as progress in the UN-led Djibouti Peace Process is being undercut by continued feuding among the Transitional Federal Government's (TFG) leadership and threatened by al-Shabaab's steady advances on the ground. The United States is playing a leading role to promote unity and peace, and Senator Feingold's meetings underscored this commitment to the Djibouti Agreement and a more comprehensive U.S. approach to Somalia, coordinated with regional and international organizations. End Summary.

Prime Minister Moving Forward:
Despite Spoilers on All Sides

¶2. (SBU) Senator Feingold's meeting with Prime Minister Nur Hassan Hussein "Nur Adde" began with the Senator underscoring U.S. support for the embattled Prime Minister and the Senator's appreciation for the work the PM has done to promote reconciliation. (Note: The long-running feud among the TFG's top leadership took a dramatic turn for the worse when TFG President Abdullahi Yusuf issued a decree on December 14 dismissing the Prime Minister.) The Prime Minister acknowledged the weakness of the TFG, opining that the international community has not provided the necessary support. Hussein said that the growing strength of al-Shabaab is directly linked to TFG weakness; the armed group is taking advantage of the TFG's failures at every turn. Yet he emphasized that there are spoilers within the Transitional Federal Institutions who are as much a challenge to the Djibouti peace process as al-Shabaab.

¶3. (SBU) Hussein told the Senator he intends to move forward on plans for an enlarged parliament including the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS), civil society and business leaders, and an inclusive unity government. Hussein said these plans are a threat to those who currently hold leadership positions. The PM assured the Senator that if President Yusuf was removed, presumably through the impeachment process initiated in the parliament, Yusuf's Darod clan would be represented in an inclusive government of national unity. The Prime Minister said he would mobilize the people and the media to bridge the divide between the high level peace process and the everyday problems on the ground. The Prime Minister expressed his commitment to moving the peace process in the right direction and using it to implement the key transitional tasks to prepare for elections. PM Hussein declared that with a free and

fair election, there would be no more need for the 4.5 clan representation system and that Somalia would usher in a new era of "one person, one vote."

TFG Weakness:
Stumbling Block for All

14. (SBU) During his meeting with the UN Secretary General's Special Representative for Somalia (SRSG) Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, Senator Feingold asked about the effects of TFG internal crises. The SRSG replied, "We can manage the TFG infighting." Ould-Abdallah also said that he favors targeted sanctions against all those blocking peace and to ensure that there are no double standards. The SRSG emphasized that Somalia needs a functioning government and that a bottom-up approach, while useful, cannot proceed with the current level of insecurity.

15. (SBU) In the Senator's meeting with the Somalia Business and Investment Council (SBIC), the business leaders complained that they are paying taxes to the TFG, but getting nothing in return. The Chairman of the Banadir Business Association estimated that they pay at least USD 1.25 million to the TFG each month, while at the same time they are forced to pay for their own private security to protect their operations. The business leaders appealed to the Senator for security assistance because "the TFG cannot protect us."

16. (SBU) Both the civil society and business leaders noted that their operations would be facilitated by a strong government, yet the TFG is unable to provide any services, especially the security they need most. All of the Somali interlocutors agreed that

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insecurity is at the root of most of Somalia's difficulties and that as long as the government remains weak, there will be no effective control in the country. When the Senator asked about the relationship between the business community and the TFG, the businessmen responded that "on the ground, the TFG is nonexistent -- a non-factor in any of our operations." Somaliland President Dahir Riyale Kahin told the Senator, "The TFG is not a government for me; the TFG is not a government for themselves."

ARS Remains Committed
To Unity Government

17. (SBU) Sheikh Sharif, Chairman of the moderate Islamist Djibouti-based wing of the ARS and the most important ARS figure in the Djibouti Process, told the Senator that despite the challenges, he remains committed to the Djibouti Process and a unity government. Sharif's ARS faction is making concrete steps on the ground to move the peace process forward. (Note: On December 10, the ARS Chairman and more than twenty ARS leaders relocated to Mogadishu, this time they say to stay, in an effort to blunt by their presence some of al-Shabaab's momentum and begin reconciliation among elements of the former Islamic Courts Union.) He welcomed the increased attention of the United States toward Somalia over the last two years and USG efforts to strengthen the peace process that "has excellent chances to succeed." Sharif maintained that success is possible, despite the weakness of the Djibouti process -- Ethiopian withdrawal, TFG weakness, the lack of funds for a joint security force, and ongoing humanitarian issues. Sharif told the Senator that the ARS is engaged in a process of government building and that "We should all be focused on a unity government rather than the former TFG."

The al-Shabaab Threat:
Real but Potentially Weakened

18. (SBU) In all of his meetings, the Senator expressed his concern with al-Shabaab's recent territorial gains. (Note: Since September, the fundamentalist armed group has seized control of the key southern ports of Kismayo and Merka and controls most of the regions in southern and central Somalia.) In response to Senator Feingold's question about the linkages between the ARS and al-Shabaab, Sharif said unequivocally that the ARS has nothing to do with al-Shabaab

and that there is no connection between the two groups. Sharif also stated that while al-Shabaab would like to have links with al-Qaeda, the links do not currently exist.

¶9. (SBU) The ARS Chairman went on to tell the Senator that there are five distinct al-Shabaab groups, but that the population does not support any of them and that as a whole, they are receiving less financial support than in the past. Sharif opined that al-Shabaab funds come from Merka and Kismayo port revenues and most importantly, from Eritrea. Sharif said that based on his presence in Mogadishu, he is confident that security can be brought back. Sharif emphasized that the first step in defeating al-Shabaab must be support for Somali unity government forces. This could be achieved by an empowered joint TFG-ARS security force, increased AMISOM capacity, and help and support from civil society.

¶10. (SBU) Although al-Shabaab controls much territory, even the civil society leaders maintained that if the joint TFG-ARS security force was immediately established and funded, al-Shabaab could be defeated. They maintained that because al-Shabaab is offering security, the group is being welcomed in many communities, but that al-Shabaab offers no other social services and cannot hold the alliance of the communities it controls, except by force. Many noted that as al-Shabaab is getting bigger, it is becoming less disciplined and the training of its troops has suffered. The business leaders were pragmatic in their approach, stating that they are forced to have contact with al-Shabaab because they must deal with the authorities in the areas they conduct business. "They have extremist ideas and were marginalized, but now they have taken over." The businessmen, like the majority of Somalis, do not like al-Shabaab, but as long as the group has control, the Somalis have no choice.

Ethiopian Withdrawal:
Risky But Necessary for
Successful Peace Process

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¶11. (SBU) Senator Feingold explored the various perspectives on Ethiopia's plans to withdraw its troops by the end of December. The Prime Minister noted Ethiopian frustration with the TFG's inability to develop institutions and exert control over security and territory. The PM was measured in his assessment of its impending withdrawal, stating that Ethiopian withdrawal is key to the Djibouti Agreement, yet it must occur only if bridging security forces have been deployed in sufficient numbers. The PM told the Senator that unless there is an urgent package that provides for security assistance, Ethiopian withdrawal could unleash a disaster and the "TFG might die."

¶12. (SBU) On the other hand, ARS Chairman Sheikh Sharif emphasized that immediate withdrawal of Ethiopian forces, at least from areas within Mogadishu, is vital to any hope for ARS success in the Djibouti process. (Note: Sharif, the ARS, and others believe the Ethiopian occupation has aided al-Shabaab by providing a cause -- the ouster of Somalia's historical enemy -- that al-Shabaab and others use to recruit Somalis from all clans to join in combat against "foreign" forces and their allies, including the TFG.)

¶13. (SBU) The civil society leaders agreed that despite the risk, Ethiopian withdrawal is critical to a successful peace process. The civil society leaders called for an immediate deployment of peacemaking/peacekeeping forces to stop the advance of extremist armed groups. They told the Senator that as long as Ethiopia remains in Somalia, al-Shabaab and the other radical groups are getting stronger. At least one civil society leader likened Somalia to "the next Afghanistan."

Peacekeeping Operation:
UN Undermining All Prospects

¶14. (SBU) SRSO Ould-Abdallah said that in order for the peace process to work, Ethiopia must leave Somalia and AMISOM must stay.

He said that while the AMISOM troop contributing countries were ready to stay, UN internal debates have undermined all efforts to secure a peacekeeping operation (PKO). He said that the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations "forced" the Secretary General to say that he is against a PKO, thus discouraging any potential troop contributing countries from pledging their support. The SRSG also noted that the UN standards for troops are unrealistic and "so high that even the United States military would not qualify." He said that it is critical for the UN to address the emergency at hand - Ethiopia is leaving and there is nothing yet to fill the vacuum.

Humanitarian Situation:
Worse Than it Has Ever Been

¶15. (SBU) The Prime Minister acknowledged the scope of the humanitarian crisis and said that deteriorating security is the root cause of the problem, as it hampers access and makes aid delivery difficult on land and because of piracy, on sea as well. PM Hussein stated unequivocally that security is key to solving the humanitarian crisis. ARS Chairman Sharif also acknowledged the humanitarian catastrophe and expressed his regret for the targeting of aid workers and kidnapping of foreigners. Sharif said that in order to address the humanitarian crisis, the U.S. must support immediate implementation of the Djibouti Agreement. Accelerated humanitarian assistance should be targeted to the communities who have demonstrated support and are implementing the peace agreement. "Anyone who opposes the agreement should have sanctions placed on them," Sharif concluded.

¶16. (SBU) Civil society leaders operating in Somalia described to Senator Feingold the deteriorating security situation that is challenging humanitarian access and shrinking the space for NGOs to work. These leaders, many of whom have been working in Somalia for decades, said security is as bad as it has ever been. The representatives appealed for more humanitarian aid to address the millions of Somalis in need. While they highlighted the myriad challenges, they also described the opportunity to use the Djibouti peace process to immediate open doors. They cautioned that if this process fails, al-Shabaab will take over. At the same time, they

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emphasized that there are "many Somalias" and it is important to focus on the places where there is peace and on the programs and initiatives that have worked.

Peace Process Only Game in Town

¶17. (SBU) SRSG Ould-Abdallah, who has been the driving force behind the Djibouti Agreement, told Senator Feingold that "After twenty years of war, if we do not push the Djibouti process, it will not work." The civil society leaders agreed, telling the Senator that the Djibouti process is different from all others because it is the first Somali process managed and run by civil society. Noting that Prime Minister Hussein comes out of the humanitarian community, the Djibouti process has a significant representation by civil society, they said. One implored us to insist on an increased presence of women in the peace talks and in any unity government noting that at present, women are absent from political decision-making and at both at the local government level and the high level processes. This sentiment was echoed by others who insisted that to be successful, the process must focus more on engaging at the grassroots. The representatives urged the Senator to help lead the U.S. administration to focus more on issues of justice, human rights, and development, and less on counter-terrorism. They agreed with the Senator's conclusion that civil society is a key nexus to bring a country together.

How Inclusive Should the Process Be?

¶18. (SBU) Senator Feingold asked his interlocutors who should be included in the Djibouti process, in particular if ARS-Asmara leader Sheikh Dahir Aweys should or could be brought in. SRSG

Ould-Abdallah said that he has no problem with Aweys being brought into the process, but that "he should not be given veto power." The Prime Minister responded that if Aweys is removed from the list of terrorists, his collaboration would be possible. Sharif said that he and his group could open discussions with Aweys once Ethiopian forces withdraw. Sharif said that Aweys could potentially be a positive force -- "We will be forced to work with him to achieve peace." Sheikh Sharif noted that civil society is represented in all aspects of the peace process and that there are seats reserved for civil society and business leaders in a unity government.

U.S. Engagement and Military Strikes

¶19. (SBU) The Prime Minister was surprisingly positive in his assessment of the effects of U.S. military strikes against high value targets inside Somalia. He told the Senator, "The strikes have been positive and without them, the TFG would not be alive today." He continued, "Aden Ayro was a threat to the TFG and his elimination was timely and appropriate." (Note: Ayro was killed in a May 2008 strike in Dusamareb.) While he acknowledged that there was anti-American sentiment, the PM said that it is not related to U.S. military strikes. The SRSB was equally supportive stating, "Ayro was killed, and it was good for all Somalis - we still need to go after terrorists. If they would like to join us, they are welcomes, but we must continue to address impunity."

¶20. (SBU) By contrast, the civil society leaders were more critical of this U.S. approach. One representative cautioned that military strikes have a direct negative effect on perceptions of U.S. NGOs operating in Somalia. He cautioned that if there is another military strike, all of the remaining American NGOs would likely be forced out of the country.

Anti-U.S. Sentiment Can Be Countered

¶21. (SBU) The Prime Minister told the Senator that contrary to popular belief, support for the United States in Somalia is increasing. PM Hussein cited the lack of a strong government, poverty, and Eritrean behavior as key determinants in increasing radicalism in Somalia. In order to stem the growth of what they said was growing anti-American sentiment, civil society leaders recommended a solid and robust commitment to Somalia by the next administration. They told the Senator that it is the perceived

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connection between Ethiopia and the United States that is at the root of most negative views toward the U.S. With 80 percent of Mogadishu's 100,000 students out of school, these ideas are being magnified in the streets they said, because they are no institutions left.

¶22. (SBU) One civil society leader noted that anti-American sentiment is highest among Western-educated young men, and noted the extreme religious teachings being propagated in Somali communities in the U.S. Many agreed that resentment is expressed by the top leadership but is not shared at the local level. To stem the tide of radicalization, they recommended direct engagement with local elders and community religious leaders and working through the clan system to win hearts and minds.

Living in Mogadishu Is Like Being Confined to Prison

¶23. (SBU) The civil society and business leaders described the difficulty of living and working in today's Somalia. Visits to the county were akin to living in prison, with many confined to their residences surrounded by armed guards. The civil society representatives told us that at least one person has been killed in each of the organizations represented. One stated, "My colleagues have been assassinated - we are a target because we can make change happen on the ground." They told the Senator that both their personal and collective sense of security has been reduced. The

business and civil society leaders noted that life before the TFG disarmament in early 2007 meant that they could operate, because each had armed personal security details. Now, the TFG does not provide the necessary security, but does not allow them or any of the humanitarian aid delivery organizations to do so themselves, leaving them completely vulnerable and an open target.

Piracy:

Are the Authorities Benefiting?

¶24. (SBU) The Senator asked Prime Minister Hussein whether there was any truth to the accusation that TFG and Puntland authorities, in addition to insurgents are all benefiting from piracy. The PM responded that he cannot deny these rumors, though it would be difficult to entirely confirm them. He said that piracy is increasing every day and the huge ransoms paid are increasingly emboldening the pirates. Hussein concluded that a strong government is critical to getting piracy under control.

Business Community:

Seeking Partnerships with U.S.

¶25. (SBU) Representatives of the Somalia Business and Investment Council (SBIC) estimated to that Senator that 60 to 70 percent of the remittances that flow into Somalia originate in the United States. (Note: financial remittances are estimated at USD 1 billion per year.) They also discussed Somali imports of sesame oil, textiles, and gold into the U.S., principally targeted at the Diaspora communities there. These business leaders work across clan divisions and with the authorities on the ground in all areas and they expressed a keen interest in exploring commercial partnerships and opportunities with U.S. businesses.

Somaliland:

Making the Case for Recognition

¶26. (SBU) Senator Feingold opened his meeting with Somaliland President Dahir Riyale Kahin by presenting condolences on the suicide bombings in Hargeisa on October 29. President Riyale told the Senator that some of the bombers were from Somaliland, but that they had trained in southern Somalia. Riyale said that the extremists are the same -- no matter where they are and where they are from, they all have the same agendas. Now, he said that many Somalilanders are helping the police and fighting terrorism at the community level, sharing information to "identify and capture terrorists." Riyale said that for Somaliland, the bombings were a "wake up call, like 9/11 for the United States." The Somaliland President said that the authorities have captured ten suspects,

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people with links to southern Somalia and potentially with al-Qaeda - "those who want a greater Islamic state."

¶27. (SBU) Riyale told the Senator that despite the bombings, Somaliland continues the progress it has made in establishing a functioning government since 1991, "While southern Somalia was at war and in a state of anarchy." He described the success as a testament to the compromises of all Somalilanders because above all else, they "made a commitment to solve their own problems." Riyale made the case for recognition noting that if they can get direct assistance, Somaliland will be able to counter the extremism being propagated through madrassas across the region. He also said that if Somaliland is recognized, it can play a role in southern Somalia as another buffer zone for Djibouti and Ethiopia. Riyale noted the hypocrisy in the international community recognition of Somalia and the TFG, neither of which are functioning, but which will not recognize the functioning "state of Somaliland."

¶28. (SBU) Riyale told the Senator voters have been registered in four of Somaliland's six regions and that the last two regions would be completed in approximately one week. The Somaliland President said that the registration process, with identification cards that include fingerprints, will ensure that the March 2009 presidential

elections will be free, fair, and transparent. In their meeting with the Senator, the civil society leaders cited Somaliland as evidence that focusing on democracy provides a "way out of the chaos."

¶29. (SBU) PM Hussein said that while Puntland would be integrated in a unity government, "Somaliland would require a special approach." The Prime Minister praised Somaliland's progress and the positive steps it has taken on elections and its democratic process. The Prime Minister concluded, "It would be our preference that Somaliland is part of Somalia, but let us solve the Somalia problem first, come together with Puntland, and then initiate a dialogue with Somaliland." President Riyale was unequivocal when he stated that "Somaliland made the union and tested it and there is no possibility for a greater Somalia." The PM said that, ultimately, the recognition question would be left to the popular will of the Somalilanders and that there was a "possibility" they would stay with Somalia"

¶30. (SBU) Riyale maintained that Somaliland is different from southern Somalia, which never tried to reconcile "even the most minor issues. The problem with Somalia is that everyone is trying to be a leader, but at the same time, they think the solution will come from outside." He said that Somalia has no "final solution - only trial and error." President Riyale concluded, "Somaliland will never reunite with Somalia and if they ever tried to force this, we are ready to fight to the finish - Somalia could never take Somaliland by force." Riyale concluded that instead, Somaliland wants to help, with Djibouti and Somalia's neighbors, be part of a solution for Somalia.

Positive Press Coverage

¶31. (U) Senator Feingold addressed the Djibouti National Television and Radio and the Somali language press and answered several questions from journalists. He also provided a separate interview to Voice of America's Somali Service. His statement was carried on Universal Television and in several Somali-language media including newspapers and websites. The Senator's press statement, issued from his office was disseminated by Embassy Nairobi to all of our Somali media contacts.

¶32. (U) Senator Feingold and Embassy Djibouti have cleared this message.

RANNEBERGER